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SUBJECT: IRANIAN STUDENT ACTIVIST VIEW OF IRAN AND US POLICY

DUBAI 00002756 001.2 OF 004

CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S) Summary: Amir Abbas Fakhavar (please protect), an Iranian student activist and political prisoner on the run in Iran since he skipped out while on prison leave in June 2005, got out of Iran in late April with the help of "friends" who bribed airport officials not to enter his name into the computer. He came to Dubai where he met with Richard Perle and received a US visa to speak about Iran, at the invitation of the American Enterprise Institute. End summary

2.(S) Amir Abbas Fakhavar (please protect) is the head of Jonbesh-e Mustaqeli-ye Doneshju (Independent Student Movement), which he describes as a sub-group of Jonbesh-e Azadi-ye Iranian (JAI or Iranian Movement of Liberation). He claims JAI has about 20,000 members inside Iran, of whom 12,000 are formal members of his subgroup. Other branches include a workers' group, a women's rights group, and a high school students group. Fakhavar met with PolEconChief May 8 and 9 to discuss the situation in Iran. He was joined by Sahar Nahrvar, an Iranian with a Dutch passport, who lives and works in the Netherlands. She is a member of JAI and acts as Fakhavar's public relations officer and translator.

3.(S) Fakhavar has been arrested 18 times and was a political prisoner in Evin prison, including long stretches of solitary confinement. He opposes the current Iranian regime and advocates a secular, democratic government. He was sentenced in 2002 to eight years' imprisonment because of his book, "This Place is Not a Ditch," in which he criticized the supreme leader. He has spoken out repeatedly about the political situation in Iran and the torture he endured, including numerous interviews with foreign press and providing Amnesty International a detailed description of his mistreatment. He says he continues to suffer from knee problems after being beaten in court. His discussion of human rights issues in Iran is contained in septel.

His View of Iran's Student Movement

4.(S) Fakhavar is a leader of the part of the student movement that calls for outright regime change, not reform. He says his group is trying to organize and unify other groups, including independent high school student groups and labor groups, and that his group does not believe in the use of violence. Its primary goal is the spread of information about the situation inside Iran. Its medium of choice is the Internet, in part because of its anonymity, but the group also publishes leaflets. He and other activists also give interviews to foreign media, including Radio Farda, VOA, and the Los Angeles based TV

stations (which he didn't hold in high regard). His group also cooperated in the production of the 2003 BBC documentary, "Forbidden Iran."

5.(S) Fakhravar called dissemination of information critical, given the Iranian government's sustained propaganda campaign. He said children in schools are taught the glories of being a suicide bomber, and that in universities, groups are baking yellow cakes, to express their support of Iran's nuclear program. He said Iranians develop a psychological "complex" because of the disconnect between what the government tells them about the world and what they learn from other sources, and asserted that both the Iranian government and others, such as the US, can use the resulting discord to their own advantage. He also claims his network has the capacity to organize "real" opinion polls inside Iran, without specifying how.

6.(S) Fakhravar, who says he is on the board of directors of the high council for a referendum, said he does not believe the current government would agree to a referendum under any circumstances. Instead, he sees the call for a referendum as a rallying cry to unite different movements. He claims this is the majority view, and only a minority, including Ali Afshari, Akbar Atri, and Mohsen Sazgara (all currently in the US), calls for international pressure on this government for democratic elections. Fakhravar was critical of other student leaders, specifically Atri, Afshari, Reza Delbari and Abdollah Momeni, inferring they had links to the regime. He claimed Afshari's father had a publication that promoted velayat-e faqih, and that the others all had brothers with IRGC/intelligence links. He noted that of the four, only Afshari had ever been sent to prison, which he said was in revenge for his activities promoting Khatami. However, in the name of unity, he would support them.

Iranian Youth

DUBAI 00002756 002.2 OF 004

7.(S) Fakhravar projected that 70% of Iranian youth were pro-US. He said many defy school rules and wear jeans with US flags. Asked whether there was not a hard-line element among Iranian youth, he was dismissive. For instance, he said when he did his military service, it was compulsory to attend designated prayers in civilian clothes, bolstering the numbers at Friday prayers. When asked about the Basij, he said, "We're all Basij." For instance, at school, they would pass out application forms and say if you want free busing, university seats, recreation, sign up. He said he signed up once for a free bus trip to Tehran. They stopped en route at nice restaurants, and when they arrived they were ushered into a stadium that seated 12,000. After chanting football cheers, they were then instructed to chant a cheer for the Islamic republic, which was then used on television.

Reform Experiment is "Over"

8.(S) Fakhravar is dismissive of Iranian reformers and advocates "closing the file" on the reform movement, saying real reform is impossible within this regime. He attacked reformers as doing nothing but helping the regime by pointing out its weaknesses so it can fix them. He says all decision-making is controlled in a triangle of the supreme leader, the Council of Guardians, and the Assembly of Experts. Any reform outside these three entities has no impact on the system. Reform can't touch the triumvirate because it is self-perpetuating, as the Assembly of Experts chooses the supreme leader who selects the members of the Council of Guardians, who vets candidates of the Assembly of Experts. He claims the supreme leader only fears Rafsanjani and has ensured that the Expediency Council, chaired by Rafsanjani, is outside this power triumvirate, regardless of his announcement last year that the Expediency Council would have additional oversight powers over the administration.

9.(S) Fakhravar sees three power groupings in Iran today, led by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, and Rafsanjani. Fakhravar claims that Rafsanjani is still politically active but "underground." He said Rafsanjani is trying to create a unified opposition to the supreme leader, working with former Majlis Speaker Karroubi, Ayatollah Montazeri, former President Khatami, Ardebili (presumably Ayatollah Musavi-Ardebili), and Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha. He thought this group was trying to ensure that either Montazeri or Rafsanjani gained control of the Assembly of Experts in the November elections. He predicted the Council of Guardians would block Montazeri but that they could not block Rafsanjani.

10.(S) Fakhravar maintained that the supreme leader controlled the IRGC and the regular army and that the power went only in one direction. However, he claimed that secret polling by the interior ministry under Khatami revealed that 85% of the IRGC and 95% of the regular army opposed the Islamic Republic. He inferred that for conducting the poll, the minister lost his job and his deputy is now being sentenced. He also was very dismissive about the Iranian military's overall readiness, as a result of years of US sanctions.

11.(S) He claimed widespread fraud in the 2005 presidential elections, saying that the government first announced that 14 million Iranians had voted, then the next day, claimed 29 million. He also said one member of the IRGC had been arrested with 600,000 Iranian birth certificates in his possession (he didn't indicate the source of this information). A student publication called "Fresh Voice" published an article asserting that the election statistics did not add up, and was closed down, despite the fact that the article was based on government figures.

Future Activities

12.(S) Fakhravar called the activities of the student movement "superficial" at this time, saying at some time in the future, they must dig deeper into the role of religion in society. Because people believe that abandoning religion is a sin, they are distrustful of secularists. He calls himself a Muslim, said he prays every day, and reads the Koran, Bible and Torah. Although he indicated his religious belief is genuine, he noted that some of his followers would not follow him if he were not religious. However, he is critical of people's understanding of Islam and is waiting for the right time to start a discussion. He has been working on a book for ten years criticizing Shia and the "myth" of the missing Imam. He joked that by the time it is released, unless Iranian society had evolved, he'd be labeled Salman Rushdie II. He said these issues - the role religion should play in society and people's understanding of their religious doctrines - would persist even if the Iranian government changed. Any new government would still need to work

DUBAI 00002756 003.2 OF 004

to persuade people to leave behind the myths about their religion. He added the Shah failed in his efforts to secularize Iranian society because he tried to isolate religion rather than integrate it. Fakhravar was complimentary of US culture where religion plays a strong role, even in politics to a degree, but the government remained separated from religious entities.

His View of US Policy Options - Sanctions

13.(S) Fakhravar's recommendation for US policy towards Iran was "complete" sanctions, followed by a publicized plan by Iranian activists and opposition from outside Iran for a new, alternative form of government. He said what is key is promotion of this new concept so that when the "uprising" comes, the Iranian people know what they are fighting for.

14.(S) Sanctions would have to be complete, including China and Russia. He believes such a sanctions regime would be more effective in Iran than it had been in Iraq, because the US now

controls most of Iran's borders. He disputed the notion that such sanctions would cause suffering by ordinary people, saying their lives are no better now than when oil was 9 USD a barrel. Oil profits don't reach the people. He compared salaries in Iran to those in North Korea, and said there are no "ordinary" jobs left, only made-up jobs and income from the black market.

15.(S) Nonetheless, he thinks such sanctions would lead people to social protests. Asked why, if their lives would not be impacted materially, he said because oil profits are used by the government to fund repression of the people. He said a few years ago, Abbas Abdi (former US Embassy takeover planner, then reformer and political prisoner) predicted that a rise in oil prices would bring about the end of reformers, because petro dollars would be used to "buy" the elections. Rising oil revenues, he said, led to the Council of Guardians budget increase of 120%, the Basij budget 400%, as well as increases for media operations, while social services and salaries for teachers, laborers, etc. have not increased at any kind of similar levels. (Note: the government has raised some salaries in Iran, but inflation tends to offset these increases. end note)

16.(S) He believes sanctions would also give political activists fodder to attack the government for harming the country. He did not think the government could make use of the sanctions to blame others for Iran's economic problems, because the Iranian people would not buy the argument that Iran is the only "good guy" and the whole world is "bad."

17.(S) Fakhravar does not advocate blocking Iran's participation in the World Cup games, although he called the team members agents of the regime and said they will use the platform of the World Cup to propagandize for the regime. (He pointed out members of the Iranian football team waiting nearby, who, as it turned out, were applying for US visas for a Memorial Day weekend tournament)

Limited Military Strikes

18.(S) While he makes clear he is not "pro war" and will not publicly advocate a limited military strike against Iran, Fakhravar thinks such a strike on Iranian nuclear infrastructure would lead to a popular uprising. He is dismissive of the alternative view (note: the majority view we hear from Iranians. end note) that such a strike by an outside force would prompt a nationalistic rallying round the flag. He said when Iraq invaded right after the revolution, the Iranian people fought for their government because they didn't know yet what their government was like. Now that they know the kind of government they have, he didn't think they would fight for it. He also says the Iranian mullahs are not the same as the Taliban mullahs, who were fighters, hardened by battle, and used to living in caves. Iranian mullahs, he said, are used to living like princes and are "just bluffing." Iranians are not fighters, he said, but are generally "lazy." He claims Iranians would welcome foreigners to "save us from ourselves." Fakhravar was very dismissive of the view more commonly heard here from Iranians that change in Iran should come internally. He claimed Iranian history showed that "all" change in Iran has come from outside, and that even prior to the revolution, the people had been repressed by the clergy.

19.(S) On the other hand, he said he is not calling for military action and does not want American youths to die for Iranians. He also took the point that it is difficult to predict the popular reaction to such a crisis situation.

View of MEK

DUBAI 00002756 004.2 OF 004

20.(S) Fakhravar said "no way" should the US ever align itself with the Mujahedin-e Khalq. Iranians hate the MEK for having

fought with Saddam Hussein against them. He doesn't think the group believes in pluralism or democracy; it does not even practice democracy internally.

VOA

21.(S) Fakhravar said "everyone" watches VOA TV, up to the heads of state. He said he'd get a lot of response any time he was interviewed on it. However, he criticized VOA's editorial policy as too neutral between the policy of reform and regime change. PolEconChief pointed out that VOA was reflective of overall USG policy.

Comment

22.(S) Fakhravar came across as a passionate, dedicated, and charismatic activist, who wants to go to the US to rally support for his cause. He claimed no interest in political asylum, because in his words, he is a "freedom fighter" and will return to Iran. He seemed to have little fear for his own safety. On several key issues, his views differed from the majority view heard here from Iranians in Dubai, such as his assertion that limited military strikes on Iran would rally the Iranian people against their government, not in support of it. His advocacy of full sanctions on Iran is also rare. Most Iranians we talk to either say change will come from within Iran, or they want the US to change their regime, but in an undefined, painless, bloodless way.

DAVIS